UNIT 6: SAMUEL JOHNSON: "LIFE OF COWLEY"

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6.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through the unit, you will be able to:

- discuss the literary genre of biography in relation to Samuel Johnson's "Life of Cowley"
- describe about the life of Cowley and his significance as a metaphysical poet
- appreciate the contribution of Johnson not only as a biographer but also as a critic
- read Johnson's *Lives* in the context of the biographical writings of the eighteenth century

6.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit helps you to discuss the genre of biography with reference to Johnson's "Life of Cowley". Perhaps you know that biography was defined by John Dryden as the "history of particular men's lives". Today, the term is

applied to “a relatively full account of a particular person’s life, involving the attemptto set forth character, temperament, and milieu, as well as the subject’s activities and experiences”(M.H.Abrams). Biography flourished in the recent decades with the introduction of new experimental methods concerning life writing. Although biography in its current form is comparatively recent, yet it has its origins in some of the older traditions of writing. The earliest biographies in England were written in Latin during the Middle Ages to glorify the saints or commemorate the good rulers. However, with the coming of the Renaissance, emphasis was given on man as an individual, and it prompted the development of the biography in English. For example, Thomas More’s “Life of Richard-III” is filled with human details and first hand observations. Thomas North’s translation of Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* in 1579 had considerable influence on English biography, particularly onIzzak Walton who wrote very well constructed biographies of the lives of the poets like John Donne and George Herbert.However, it was in the eighteenth century that biography became really popular with numerous biographical collections such as Samuel Johnson’s *Lives of the English Poets* (1779- 81). In this unit, you will not only get to read about the life and works of Johnson but will also read about one of his famous biographical accounts of the metaphysical poet Cowley.

6.3 DR SAMUEL JOHNSON: THE BIOGRAPHER

The eighteenth century which is also termed as the Augustan Age or the Classical Age of English literature has produced many literary luminaries such as Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, Edmund Burke and others. Among such luminaries one was Dr Samuel Johnson whose writings have considerably influenced and developed the English language. Johnson is known both for his poetry and prose works.

6.3.1 His Life and Works

Samuel Johnson was born on September 18, 1709 at Lichfield, Straffordshire to Michael Johnson, a bookseller and Sarah

Ford Johnson. Both the parents were from considerably well-to- do families, but inspite of it, they had to undergo financial hardships. When he was three years of age, he was brought to London for the treatment of scrofula, a disease known as King's evil in the earlier times as it was believed that only the touch of a royal family member could cure it. There, he was touched by Queen Anne, but it did not cure the ailment and left scars on his body.

In the year 1717, he entered Lichfield Grammar School and became a child prodigy because of his ability to remember volumes of classical texts and authors. Johnson, however disliked the undue attention that he was receiving. By the time he was sixteen, he was given an opportunity o stay with his cousins, the Fords, at Worchestershire. Under the tutelage of Cornelius Ford, a renowned and successful academic of his times,Johnson acquired much knowledge of the classical works. After spending six months with his cousins, he returned to Lichfield but he was denied admission into his old school by the headmaster due to the long absence. Consequently, he joined another school in Stourbridge which enabled him to spend more time with the Fords, and he began to do translations and write more verse. However, he once again returned to Lichfield.

According to his biographer, Johnson's family was faring badly economically due to the debts of his father. So, Johnson too began working in his father's bookshop, stitching books for his father and also acquiring knowledge of books simultaneously.The young Johnson managed to get admission into Pembroke College in 1728 after inheriting some money from his cousin Elizabeth Harriott, after her death. However, after thirteen months he was forced to leave the college without a degree due to shortage of funds, and he returned to Lichfield. It was much later, in 1755, prior to the publication of his *Dictionary*, that he received a Master of Arts degree from Oxford University. Further he was also awarded with an honorary doctorate in 1765 by Trinity College, Dublin, and by Oxford University in 1775.

During his time in Lichfield, he married the much older Elizabeth Porter, the widow of his close friend Harry Porter. The wide age difference between them caused much friction within the Porter family.With the help of his wife, he established school in Edial near Lichfield in1735. The venture wasn't successful as the school had only three students, and it cost his wife a substantial portion of her income. On March 2, 1737, the day his younger brother died, Johnson left for London with his former pupil David Garrick. Garrick had connections in London that enabled Johnson to write and communicate with some of the founders of periodicals and publishers. Soon he began writing for Edward Cave's *The Gentleman's Magazine* on regular basis, and brought his wife to London having established himself as a writer.A year later, his most important poetic composition *London* was published. Between the years 1737 and 1739, Johnson began living with the poet Richard Savage in Grub Street, and the two began living in taverns. Savage's friends tried to help him by attempting to persuade him to move to Wales, but Savage ended up in Bristol and again fell into debt. He died in 1743 in debtors' prison and a year later, Johnson wrote *Life of Richard Savage* (1744).

Johnson's reputation lies not only on his works but also on other aspects of his life. He had no children but he accepted many dependants such as Robert Levet, an unlicensed and alcoholic doctor who worked with the poor, and the blind Anna Williams, his wife's friend. After the death of Levet in 1782, Johnson wrote a famous elegy on the doctor. Further he was also generous with literary support for other writers, particularly women writers such as Elizabeth Carter, Fanny Burney, Charlotte Lenox and others. Samuel Johnson passed away in the year 1784 at his house in Bolt Court and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

Samuel Johnson's literary career embarked with numerous essays that he contributed to *Birmingham Journal*, and the translation of the Portuguese work *Voyage to Abyssinia* in 1735.In 1737, he set

off to London and there began to make regular contributions to *Gentleman's Magazine* in the form of prefaces, poems, Latin verses, biographies, and most notably *Parliamentary Debates,* which were widely accepted as authentic speeches by the great politicians of the day. In 1738, he published the poem *London* based in part on his friendship with the poet Richard Savage. Johnson wrote *The Life of Richard Savage* later in 1744 which was included in *The Lives of the English Poets*, and it reflected the pitfalls of Grub Street(a locality associated with amateur poets and writers). Then, in 1739, he wrote *Marmor Norfolciense* where he attacked Robert Walpole's governance. He further wrote *Compleat Vindication of the Licensers of the Stage,* a work that spoke against Stage Lincensing Act of 1737. Between the years 1743- 44, he wrote the *Harleian Miscellany* and the *Miscellaneous Observations on the tragedy of Macbeth* came out in 1745.

Johnson began his work on the *Dictionary* in 1747 and he dedicated it to the Earl of Rochester. The year 1749 saw the publication of *The Vanity of Human Wishes* which bore just his own name. His play *Irene* was produced by David Garrick; although the play was not very successful it brought him £300. Soon, in 1750, Johnson brought out his own periodical, the *Rambler*. He also began contributing regularly from 1753 to 1754 to John Hawkesworth's *Adventurer.* Soon, after nine years of hard work Johnson's *Dictionary* came out in 1755. This work established his reputation and importance as one of the most significant writer of his times. He continued writing essays, reviews and political articles for various periodicals. During the period 1758- 60, he wrote the *Idler* papers.

By this time he had gained considerable eminence, and became a member of the Club, a group that was founded in 1764, to hold regular meetings of literary men of eminence such as Oliver Goldsmith, Edmund Burke, Joshua Reynolds and others. In 1765, Johnson's edition of Shakespeare's works appeared, for which he received assistance from George Stevens who also helped with the later revisions of the work. The *Preface* of this work became one of the finest works of critical prose.

He also dedicated himself to political writings such as *The False Alarm* (1770),*Thoughts…Respecting Falkland Islands* (1771), *The Patriot* (1774), and *Taxation No Tyranny* (1775). Then, it was in 1777 that he undertook the project of writing *The Lives of the English Poets*, at the request of a guild of booksellers. This work remains the crowning glory of his old age, and still continues to be the most important biographical work produced during the eighteenth century.



LET US KNOW

In his seminal essay "On the Genius of Biography", Johnson wrote that, "No species of writing…can more certainly enchain the human heart by irresistible interest, or more widely diffuse instruction to every diversity of condition…We are all prompted by the same motives, all deceived by the same fallacies, all animated by hope, obstructed by danger, entangled by desire and seduced by pleasure."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: How was the family background of Johnson when he had been a child?

Q 2: List the name of a few works by Samuel Johnson.

6.4 EXPLANATION OF THE TEXT

The Lives of the English Poets was originally titled as*Prefaces, Biographical and Critical, to the Works of the English Poets* and it was written during the period 1779-81. In the year 1777, Johnson was invited by a deputation of booksellers to provide biographical prefaces for an edition of the works of various English poets, from the period of John Milton onwards. This was a marketing ploy so as to eliminate all the rival cheap multi-volume collections which were published in Scotland. To this proposed edition, Johnson also added some minor poets. By the time it was published, it comprised of four volumes in 1781.

Biography:

The word biography has its origins in the Greek words 'bios', meaning 'life' and 'graphy', meaning 'writing'. So, the term 'biography' means 'writing about life'. Thus, the terms more or less encapsulates the nature and scope of the genre. Biography is that branch of literature, which is about the life of a human being.

The *Lives* contains much interesting biographical information, especially in those cases where the concerned poet was personally known to Johnson. However Johnson's work was at times controversial as it was marked by idiosyncrasy. Nevertheless the work is characterised by a deep appreciation of the achievements of the poets in their personal and historical situations. Thus, in spite of the flaws, Johnson's *Lives* remains a classic in the history of criticism.

Johnson begins the biography of Abraham Cowley by mentioning his predecessor Sir Thomas Sprat who had already produced a biographical work on Abraham Cowley. Johnson subtly criticises Sprat's work by claiming that it worked more in the manner of a panegyric. Minute details concerning the chronology of Cowley's life seems to be missing in Sprat's work. As such Johnson in the very beginning justifies the need for writing a well structured and chronological account of Cowley's life.

Samuel Johnson begins the life history of Cowley by speaking of his family background. Cowley's father is claimed to be a sectary,that is, a Protestant Dissenter who had nothing to do with the church. Johnson refers to another writer, Anthony Wood's essay, where it is claimed that Cowley was born after the death of his father, and his mother had to face much hardships while bringing up her son. In Sprat's account it has also been mentioned that Cowley greatly revered his mother and performed his duties as a son.

Within the essay, there are certain images from Cowley's life that Johnson intends to recreate in the minds of his readers. For example, he speaks of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* that was diligently read by the young Cowley near the window of his mother's room. This image has the bearings of showing what Cowley was to become in the future – a poet. In

this regard, Johnson writes that such incidents "produce that particular designation of mind, and propensity for some certain science or employment, which is commonly called Genius." The influence of one artist over another is duly expressed when he speaks of how his friend, the famous painter of the eighteenth century Joshua Reynolds was inspired by Richardson.

Johnson, citing from Sprat's biography informs the reader that Cowley was never very good in mathematics in school, but he excelled in the study of language. He points out that such attribute is characteristically seen in the major poets of every age, whether it is Alexander Pope, John Milton or Abraham Cowley. The essayist gives examples of how Cowley started quite young. At the age of ten, he had composed *The Tragical History of Pyramus and Thisbe*, and two years later he wrote *Constantia and Philetus.* While he was in school, Cowley wrote a play called *Love's Riddle*, though it was published only when he was in Cambridge; it was dedicated to Sir Kenelm Digby, an author, poet and patron of repute. In the year 1636, he moved to Cambridge where he worked rigorously and finished a greater part of *Davideis*. Cowley also became well-known when the play *The Guardian* was enacted in Cambridge during the presence of the prince who was much entertained by it. After attaining his master degree from Cambridge, Cowley was in St John's College in Oxford from where he published the satirical *The Puritan and the Papist*. Cowley particularly attracted the attention of the members of the royalty and those associated with them. In 1644, he left Oxford for Paris, where he was at the service of Lord Henry Jeremy at the court of Henrietta Maria In 1654, he returned to England, apparently as a Royalist spy, and was imprisoned briefly in 1655. During this period, he published *Poems (1656)* and in the Preface he expressed his desire to settle in some lonely American plantation and to forsake the world entirely. Johnson writes that Thomas Sprat has been generous in his representation of Cowley as it was well known that the poet had lost the trust of Royals. Soon after, he had obtained the guise of a physician which he justified as being necessary for his safety and went to France. He nevertheless obtained a degree of physic from Oxford, and Johnson writes that "at the same time were produced, from the same university, the two great poets, Cowley and

Milton, of dissimilar genius, of opposite principles". By making a comparison between the two, Johnson also shows the differences in the ideals of the two poets. While Milton was interested in the traditional norms associated with the Classical poets and their writings, Cowley was keen on expressing his own beliefs and principles by using the diction of the ancient poets.

Johnson also writes about the disappointment of Cowley after the Restoration when he was not rewarded for the services rendered. And he spent the last days of his life in Barnes and Chertsey. Here we see that Johnson at times becomes highly cynical about the portrayal of Cowley's life. For example,when he cites Cowley's letter to Thomas Sprat that was written from Chertsey in 1665, there is an ironic tone. Cowley complained of the lack of comforts and companionship in Chertsey. But after he passed away in 1667, in Chertsey, Cowley was given a grand funeral, and was buried near Chaucer and Spenser, and was praised by King Charles that "Mr. Cowley had not left behind him abetter man in England." Johnson asserts that Sprat had to write the narrative of Cowley's life in a cautious way so that he does not offend any powerful figure of his times. There were things easily left out that often leaves the reader unsatisfied because Sprat had provided only a chronological study of Cowley's life without going into the details of certain important aspects of his writings. As such Johnson admits that his essay was written with the purpose of supplementing Sprat's narrative.

He initiates his discussion of metaphysical poetry by defining the characteristics seen in metaphysical poetry. He specifically points out to the poets of the seventeenth century as metaphysical poets, poets who were men of learning, and made good use of their knowledge and within the composition of verses. Johnson, by referring to Aristotle writes that the metaphysical writers imitated neither imitated man, life or nature. They also did not represent the workings of the intellect, and in that they might lose their position as poets. Dryden himself stated that he and his contemporaries were below Donne in wit, but they surpassed him when it came to poetry. Citing Pope's definition of wit as "That which was often thought but never so well expressed", the essayist writes that the metaphysical never attained nor sought to be witty, but rather they were singular in their thought process

and their language was nonchalant. You must note that Johnson's critical views on metaphysical poetry is significant. He states that Pope's definition of wit is incorrect or rather limited because if the reader reads the poetry of the metaphysical poets, he will find that the wit creates *Discordia concors*, that is it creates "a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike". Further he also writes that varied ideas are joined together and the reader has to be mentally active to grasp the meaning of the poem. According to Johnson this kind of poetry can earn the admiration of the reader but the latter is seldom pleased.

The metaphysical poetssimply looked upon human nature much like classical deities and chose to remark rather than rectify human behaviour.As such the poems they composed, entertained but were indifferent in tone. Further great poets often achieve sublimity by writing things that escapes the attention of others. The metaphysical poets, however used their power of observation and knowledge in an analytic way. They tried break up every image from nature or life to provide meanings of their own, and in doing so sublimity is never achieved.

In spite of the flaws, the metaphysical poets' endeavour and labour that went into their composition of poetry, and their position as poets cannot be sidelined. Johnson claims that in reading the works of this unique group of poets, the reader will always find something new to examine or study. Johnson believes that the metaphysical poets' ability to reflect and compare, and their wide use of knowledge is something to be admired.

John Donne and the other metaphysical poets borrowed this style of writing from the Italian poet Giambattista Marino and his followers who were known for their complex way of writing poetry. Johnson claims that even Ben Jonson wrote in a similar way by making use of irregular rhythmic lines.Their immediate successors such as Suckling, Waller, Denham, Cowley, Clieveland and Milton attempted to evolve this type of writing in their own way. Among all these poets, it was only Abraham Cowley who, Johnson opines, excelled than even his predecessors in writing metaphysical poetry. Samuel Johnson, in order to justify his claims make use of various examples. He cites lines from poems written by Abraham Cowley as well as John

Donne and these examples are used to show how Cowley evolved metaphysical poetry by adding more sentiment and rhythm to it. Through these examples, Johnson shows the significance of their poetry but at the same time he also points out the flaws because of which metaphysical poets especially Cowley is not considered a great poet. He writes:

They were in very little care to clothe their notions with elegance of dress, and therefore miss the notice and the praise which are often gained by those who think less, but are more diligent to adorn their thoughts.

While describing their subject, the metaphysical poets did not look for images, instead their attempt was to look for conceits. However when they wrote on common subjects, these poets instead of relying on scholastic knowledge, they made use their fertile imagination. He gives an example from one of Cowley's poems where the poet speaks about Hope:

Hopes, whose weak being mind is,
Alike if it succeed and if it miss;
Whom good or ill does equally confound,
And both the horns of fate's dilemma wound;
Vain shadow! which dust vanish quite,
Both at full noon and perfect night!
The stars have not a possibility
Of blessing thee;
If things then from their end we happy call
'Tis Hope is the most hopeless thing of all.
Hope, thou bold tester of delight,
Who, whilst thou shouldst but taste, devour'st it quite!
Thou bring'st us an estate, yet leav'st us poor
By clogging it with legacies before!

Samuel Johnson is of the opinion that the general tendency in the metaphysical poets was to write about that which is considered "improper and vicious" and to represent them in an unusual way. From your earlier reading of poems written by metaphysical poets as well as the examples given in the essay, you will see that metaphysical poets always attempted to write in an unconventional way to earn the admiration of the readers.

Amorousness is very much present in the love poetry of the metaphysical poets. But in doing so, they often fail to delight the readers. After looking into the general characteristics of the metaphysical poetry, Johnson speaks about Cowley who was the last of the "metaphysical poets" and is considered the best by Johnson. Cowley's *Miscellanies* contained varied styles written, Johnson believes, by a mind which was at leisure. He gives the example of *Ode on Wit* in which Cowley condemns the exuberance of wit.

Abraham Cowley is also known for having written many elegies that show the relationship and connections of the poet with some of the significant political and literary figures of his times. He wrote many a poems to Lord Falkland who was considered an important diplomatic figure of his times. Some of these compositions were an elegy on Henry Wotton, a diplomat and close friend of John Donne. Yet there was something missing in these verses. Johnson cites the example of the poem written after the death of his friend William Hervey, where there is more praise and less emotion involved. The essayist writes that Cowley "wishes to make us weep, he forgets to weep himself, and diverts his sorrow by imagining how his crown of bays, if he had it, would crackle in the fire." Yet there were also other poems belonging to a completely different order such as the verses written to Davenant that had hints of critical thinking. Johnson in this regard states that people have often read Cowley's poetry without really going through his critical ideas and viewpoints that have been expressed in the Preface and notes added to *Davideis*. For example, in *Reason: The use of it in Divine Matters,* Cowley speaks both for and against Reason. Cowley wrote that the purpose of reason is to judge the nature or reality of knowledge.

After his *Miscellanies,* Cowley is known for a volume of translated poems called *Anacreon* that projects the *carpe-diem* principle ("enjoying the present day"). These poems expressed festivity and merriment, which was very much different from the works he composed. Cowley's next collection of poems called *The Mistress* express the same kind of beauty and wit as expected in metaphysical poetry.The use of hyperbolic language in the expression of love fails to create the beauty and finesse associated with love poems. The conceits in *The Mistress*, Addison wrote once displayed

mixed wit, that is there is thought which is true in one sense of expression and false on the other. As such it fails to recreate the emotion associated with love. Johnson admits that Cowley's *Pindaric Odes* are better compositions in comparison. In the Odes, Cowley has successfully recovered the ways of writing verses associated with ancient poets. The odes are elegant and inspire emotion.Cowley has followed the Pindaric tradition of composing and this is evident in some of the examples given by Johnson:

Begin the song, and strike the living lyre:
Lo how the years to come, a numerous and well-fitted quire,
All hand in hand do decently advance,
And to my song with smooth and equal measure dance;
While the dance lasts, how long soe'er it be,
My music's voice shall bear it company;
Till all gentle notes be drown'd
In the last trumpet's dreadful sound.

After describing the works of Cowley that highlights the significance of Cowley as a metaphysical poet, Johnson then speaks about the flaws seen in the writing of Cowley as much as in other metaphysical poets. The use of metaphors at times diminishes the spirit of the poem. In this regard he speaks of the ode *Muse.*The labour and knowledge that Cowley applies in representing Muse makes the ode distasteful with unnecessary details and so the beauty of the subject is lost. Apart from this, Cowley also experimented a lot with the verse length especially when he was translating the verses written by the ancient poets. Johnson states that the poet should have written those verses in the same form as they were originally written, and could have added only when the something was missing in those verses:

The great pleasure of verse arises from the known measure of the lines, and uniform structure of the stanzas, by which the voice is regulated, and the memory relieved.

However, Johnson believes that such flaws do not diminish Cowley's importance as a poet. *Davideis* is given a position of significance by Johnson, and the latter states that like other great poets such as Virgil, Statius and

Spenser, *Davideis* remained unfinished. Cowley originally wanted to extend the work to twelve books, but it was left at the fourth.As a critical writer, Johnson points out that unlike other celebrated works,Colwey's *Davideis*is hardly mentioned or discussed by scholars. He states that it is partly due to the choice of the subject and the performance of the work that it has remained neglected.*Davideis* suffers from the same flaws as those mentioned earlier. The abundant use of conceits diverts the attention of the reader rather than make him appreciate the imaginative power and the subject matter of the work. Cowley's description lacks the imaginative faculty that creates awe in the mind of the readers.The lines from the work show that it lacks poetical description. Here Cowley did not create images, rather he made inferences. This was mainly because he adopted a form that was in vogue during his contemporary time.

Johnson's essay on Abraham Cowley also serves as an example for the future poets to understand the importance of application of diction and imagination in the composition of poetry:

His diction was in his own time censured as negligent. He seems not to have known, or not to have considered, that words being arbitrary must owe their power to association, and have the influence, and that only, which custom has given them. Language is the dress of thought; and as the noblest men, or most graceful action, would be degraded and obscured by a garb appropriated to the gross employments of rustics or mechanics; so the most heroic sentiments will lose their efficacy, and the most splendid ideas drop their magnificence, if they are conveyed by words used commonly upon low and trivial occasions, debased by vulgar mouths, and contaminated by inelegant applications

Johnson concludes the essay by saying that it cannot be denied that Cowley contributed a lot in creating interest towards the ode. He chose not to directly translate and be a mere imitator of the Classical poets, instead he taught the future poets, the importance of adding one's own thoughts in those works. It showed that the process of versification could be improved even in translating the classical works. And the poetic specimens he has left behind could be improved by the later poets to come.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: What was the original title of *Lives of the English Poets*?

Q4: How does Johnson begin his essay?

Q5: Which biographer's work does Johnson follow while writing *Life of Cowley*?

6.5 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

After reading the essay, you will find that Johnson's method of writing the biography is marked by chronicling the concerned poet's life, and then offering a critical assessment of his work particularly by exploring metaphysical poetry. If you go through some of the other biographical accounts from *The Lives of the English Poets*, you will see that it is true in case of all his biographical writings. Johnson draws on many first hand accounts based on writings by his predecessors and relies on his own prodigious memory. While doing so, Johnson offers very interesting character studies of many important literary figures of the different ages starting from the Restoration period. It is equally important to note his critical comments on Cowley. The biographer-essayist's judgments display the particular prejudices of the Augustan Age where certain literary characteristics were considered as virtues in the writing of poetry. This includes strong but unforced rhyme scheme,a didactic tone, and elevated language with meaningful figurative language. Johnson shows great insight, however, into the strengths and limitations of most poets whose work he reviews. The significance of his commentary can best be seen in the single example of his essay on Cowley. Johnson had dismissed the 17th century Metaphysical Poets as people who wrote verses but failed to write good poetry that could inspire and touch the readers. That judgment remained as a canon until T. S. Eliot's celebration of the works of this group of poets in his seminal essay "The Metaphysical Poets".



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q6: Comment on Johnson's style and technique.

6.6 CRITICAL RECEPTION

Johnson's reputation as an 18th century biographer and the significance of his *Lives of the English Poets* are accepted by all. In his *Johnson's Lives* (1878), Mathew Arnold summarised Johnson's contribution as "The more we study Johnson, the higher will be our esteem for the power of his mind, the width of his interests, the largeness of his knowledge , the freshness, fearlessness, and strength of his judgments." Johnson believed in maintaining an English literary cannon surpassing the literature of the other nations but that cannon was not supposed to be determined by any single critic. Unlike the modern critics like T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis, and Harold Bloom who believed in a certain kind of reordering of the English tradition, Johnson intermixed literary criticism, biographical information, and cultural context. Johnson was a great observer and the authority with which he expresses himself reveals his ability to observe. Thus, Johnson had received much acclaim from his contemporary critics as well as readers. James Boswell even made him the subject of what is often called the greatest biography in English, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, L.L.D.* (1791). Johnson was one of those writers to propose a kind of freedom from classical rules and prescriptions for literary composition. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Hazlitt, and the other critics of the eighteenth century criticised Johnson's neoclassical principles and disputed his evaluations of authors. Yet, his scope of writings made him what we may now call a public intellectual. In the 19th century, interest in Johnson was centered on his personality, which was also the subject matter of Boswell's biography. But it was only in the 20th century that his writings gained unprecedented attention.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: Write a note on the critical reception of the Johnson's *Lives of the English Poets.*



6.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you learned about Samuel Johnson's life and works, and his significance as an eighteenth century writer. "Life of Cowley"not only helps you to understand Cowley's Life, rather it also throws light on the nature of Johnson's prose. Johnson as aliterary figure of the eighteenth century, much like his contemporaries, gave much importance to the purpose of writing. This biographical piece, more than just being a biographical writing, enlightens the reader about the characteristics of metaphysical poetry following which his views regarding metaphysical poetry, especially in relation to Abraham Cowley, becomes pertinent. By using the books suggested in the section below, you can learn more about this writer and his prose works.



6.8 FURTHER READING

1) Boswell, James. (2008). *The Life of Samuel Johnson (Penguin Classics.* Penguin Classics.

2) Boulton, T. James. (1971). *Johnson: The Critical Heritage.*Routledge.

3) Daiches, David. (1979). *A Critical History of English Literature: The Restoration to 1800.* New Delhi: Allied Publisher.

4) Fowler, Roger. (1973). *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms*. London: Routledge.

5) Johnson, Samuel. (1997). *Lives of the English Poets: A Selection.* New Delhi: Universal Book Stall.

6) Leitch, Vincent B. (ed). (2001). *The Norton Anthology: Theory and Criticism*. London: Norton & Company.

7) *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, (Macropedia) Volume 22 , 15th Edition, 2005.

8) Wimsatt, W. K. *The Prose Style of Samuel Johnson*.

6.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: According to his biographer, Johnson's family was faring badly economically due to the debts of his father. So, as a child Johnson too began working in his father's bookshop, stitching books for his father and also acquiring knowledge of books simultaneously.

Ans to Q No 2: The poem 'London",*The Life of Richard Savage* later in 1744,the *Dictionary* in 1747, *Marmor Norfolciense*, *Compleat Vindication of the Licensers of the Stage,* the *Idler* papers, *The False Alarm* (1770),*Thoughts…Respecting Falkland Islands* (1771), *The Patriot* (1774), *Taxation No Tyranny* (1775) and so on.

Ans to Q No 3: *The Lives of the English Poets* was originally titled as *Prefaces, Biographical and Critical, to the Works of the English Poets* and it was written during the period 1779-81.

Ans to Q No 4: Johnson begins the biography of Abraham Cowley by mentioning his predecessor Sir Thomas Sprat who had already produced a biographical work on Abraham Cowley. Johnson subtly criticises Sprat's work by claiming that it worked more in the manner of a panegyric. Minute details concerning the chronology of Cowley's life seems to be missing in Sprat's work. As such Johnson in the very beginning justifies the need for writing a well structured and chronological account of Cowley's life.

Ans to Q No 5: Thomas Sprat. But, Johnson subtly criticizes Sprat's work by claiming that it worked more in the manner of a panegyric. Minute details concerning the chronology of Cowley's life seems to be missing in Sprat's work.

Ans to Q No 6: Johnson's method of writing the biography is marked by chronicling the concerned poet's life, and then offering a critical assessment of his work particularly by exploring metaphysical poetry.

Ans to Q No 7: Johnson is praised for maintaining an English literary cannon. Mathew Arnold in his *Johnson's Lives* (1878), summarised Johnson's contribution with very high regards to the writer. Unlike the modern critics like T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis, and Harold Bloom who believed in a certain kind of reordering of the English tradition, Johnson intermixed literary criticism, biographical information, and cultural context. James Boswell even made him the subject of what is often called the greatest biography in English, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, L.L.D.* (1791).



6.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1: What do you understand by the term biography? Discuss the role of Johnson as a biographer from your reading of *Life of Cowley.*

Q2: Critically analyse Johnson's role as a critic in the essay especially when he discusses the metaphysical poets.

Q3: Write about Cowley's life as a poet from your reading of the "Life of Cowley".

Q4: Write short notes on the following:

i. Biography as a literary genre

ii. Style and Technique in "Life of Cowley"

Q5: Johnson's method of writing the biography is marked by chronicling the concerned poet's life, and then offering a critical assessment of his work. Discuss.